

Guest Editorial - Are Libraries privileged spaces?

Introduction

A recently published book entitled 'Privileged Spaces' (Everitt & Everitt, 2024), explores how evolving university estates strategies impact library spaces. These so-called privileged library spaces provide "*a haven to think, explore the wonders of rich collections, seek solace or simply meet friends*", but we wanted to take the opportunity in this editorial to explore where there are other definitions or tests of privilege which could equally be applied to the *academic* library.

Discussion

The Cambridge Dictionary gives three possible definitions below of 'privilege' (Cambridge Dictionary, 2025) which we examine in turn drawing from our own contributions to the book:

1. to give a right or advantage to one person or group of people and not to others

Academic library heads would say that they work hard to make sure that they are *not* providing a particular advantage to one person or group within their university community above all others and that the concept of 'library privilege' is usually synonymous with the universal right for a university member to access, study in and borrow from their libraries.

In one of the chapters of the book, Cox et al. (2024) set out to test this in their attempt to understand how University of Sheffield students experience their campus (including the libraries), as a learning landscape. They were particularly interested in how part-time students, ethnic minority students, students with disabilities and LGBTQ+ students experience that space. Where do they do their learning? Is the space readable and comfortable? Is it, as would be hoped, a place where learning is inspired and learning relationships thrive; a diverse and inclusive space? As a research team, mostly of teachers, they were intrigued by what the experience of trying to learn on campus is actually like, beyond their usual, narrow vista of what happens in the classroom.

They were also motivated particularly from an Equality, Diversity & Inclusivity (EDI) perspective. While we all want to believe our institutions are inclusive, there are disturbing experiences captured in the literature of alienation, of lack of belonging, library (and campus?) anxiety, and even of discrimination. Fortunately, their findings suggested that this was not a major issue at Sheffield, but it did emerge that small, easy to overlook aspects such as lighting or the quality of noise are very important in shaping experiences of space, particularly for students with disabilities. Different students want very different things as we all know.

Also reinforced was the sense that Sheffield students make limited use of the breadth of the campus, relying on a few familiar locations to study. The research aimed to help students make better use of the wider spaces available to them seeking how to make them more comfortable to explore and use different places for different tasks. No surprise though, that this research reinforced the sense that the library is a key place on campus for student learning and is very highly valued. But what happens when the library gets full around exam time? The output hoped for was a new way to map the campus, driven by student experience and comment but admittedly they have not yet achieved that goal, partly

because they did not really fully understand how the campus gets designed and would have benefited from the new insights from those key actors who have the responsibility to run the campus as a whole: Facility management and estates professionals.

2. to give something **more importance than other things**

On the other hand, library leaders would surely admit to the second of the above definitions as they strive to make the case internally and externally for library resource, prestige and impact over and above other parts of the University community, even if they are working in partnership, building relationships etc.

Academic libraries sit within institutions that are battling an increasingly challenging and higher education landscape that is confronting an unsustainable funding system, competition for student numbers and large increases in operational costs. Within this context library leaders need to work especially hard to fight for continuing investment and to be seen as having **'more importance than other things'**. To do this there needs to be a clear articulation of the benefits and opportunities that libraries bring to the delivery of institutional strategies and the benefits or return of investment, whether this be for recruitment, league tables, research funding, student progression or wellbeing.

O'Neill (2024) argues that as Libraries sit at the nexus of professional services and the faculty, libraries' projects can be well placed to garner wide support, deliver on these multiple agendas and strategies and derive maximum benefit. However, in order to build that support, it is essential to remember that Universities by their very nature are discursive environments, and it is vital to invest the time to confer, discuss, explore and exchange ideas about any proposal being made.

However, this chapter also recognises that engagement is a complex area, where notions of privilege need to be both acknowledged through stakeholder mapping using for example Mendelow's (1991) power/interest matrix, but also ignored. Privilege conferred by position needs to be offset by ensuring there is a forum to involve and provide wider community input and to acknowledge the significance and influence of roles that sit outside of formal governance structures (e.g., estates team, departmental administrators, personal assistants, liaison librarians and finance business partners).

3. a **special advantage or authority possessed by a particular person or group.**

Finally, a unique survey of UK academic library heads conducted for the book (Wales, 2024) found that many library leaders do not believe themselves to possess any **'special advantage or authority privilege'** over their library estates strategy as ultimately any associated decisions on new library spaces or major refurbishments often lie elsewhere in the University hierarchy, even if library input is included. It would be an interesting exercise, perhaps, to test perceptions on the other side of the conference table and see if such perceptions are shared by university senior management! However, we do know from Baker & Allden's (2017) leadership research for SCONUL, that senior leaders advise library leaders not to be pigeon-holed as librarians if they want to get things done in their institutions, even suggesting that they 'lose the library' from their responsibilities or job-titles! This was born out in the chapter's survey which found that it was either the Chief Operating Officer (or equivalent role) or the Vice-Chancellor who had the special authority or final say on library space projects. This is not really a surprise when from personal professional experience at several different UK universities, not one library head had a presence on university estates committees where such

projects are discussed, even more surprising given their acknowledged dedication to providing high quality student study and space holistically.

The survey also tested whether academic libraries had any inherent special advantage, privilege or perceived prestige (examples might be architectural merit, institutional history, reputation etc). which might be deployed as an additional 'bargaining chip' when the subject of estates strategy negotiations against competing internal demands. The answer was an unexpected 'No' with effective stakeholder relationships established in advance and student experience arguments seen as more valuable. This is surprising given the role academic library staff play in gathering insights from users about the demand for and use of space, their expertise in the design and management of what is often the busiest building on campus, the implementation of digital tools and equipment and sustainability initiatives relating to energy efficiency and building management. All within a context where investment in library spaces often appear at the forefront of marketing materials and are a central draw and essential part of open days.

Conclusion

In summary, we believe that academic libraries *are indeed* privileged spaces, according to at least one of the three definitions we have tested above. We have even found in writing this editorial that the book itself privileges the student library experience over and above the staff library experience. Perhaps because as all three of us work in UK higher education institutions, this is our experience with regard to the annual cycle of NSS, PTES and PRES student satisfaction surveys with no national staff equivalents. But, taking a step back, we are in agreement that it is increasingly hard to make sure that this privilege, however it is defined, is maintained in light of competing university interests, differing user expectations and fuzziness of ownership and associated decision-making. Nevertheless, the universal prize of us all collectively striving to maintain a rich university campus life in hard times as highlighted in 'Privileged spaces' is well worth remembering.

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Disclosure statement

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